

Praise for

INTO THE GREY

**Winner of the CBI Book of the Year
and Children's Choice Award**

“A truly haunting story.”

Irish Times

“Young teenagers will be gripped by this supernatural thriller...

The novel's key theme of loss is explored ... with poignancy and some humour. An impressive work that ... offers thrills along with an important but understated lesson in humanity.”

The Sunday Business Post

“Celine Kiernan's mastery of imagery and ability to enthrall will keep the young adult [reader] spellbound... It is a well-crafted introduction to a darker genre of fantasy prose.”

Readplus

“Clever... Inventive... Genuinely creepy.”

The October Advocate



INTO THE GREY

CELINE KIERNAN

WALKER
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated, as they may result in injury.

First published in Great Britain 2013 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

Published in agreement with The O'Brien Press Ltd., Dublin

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2011 Celine Kiernan
Cover photographs © 2013 SuperStock / Getty Images
and Marcos Welsh / Getty Images

The right of Celine Kiernan to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Bembo

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

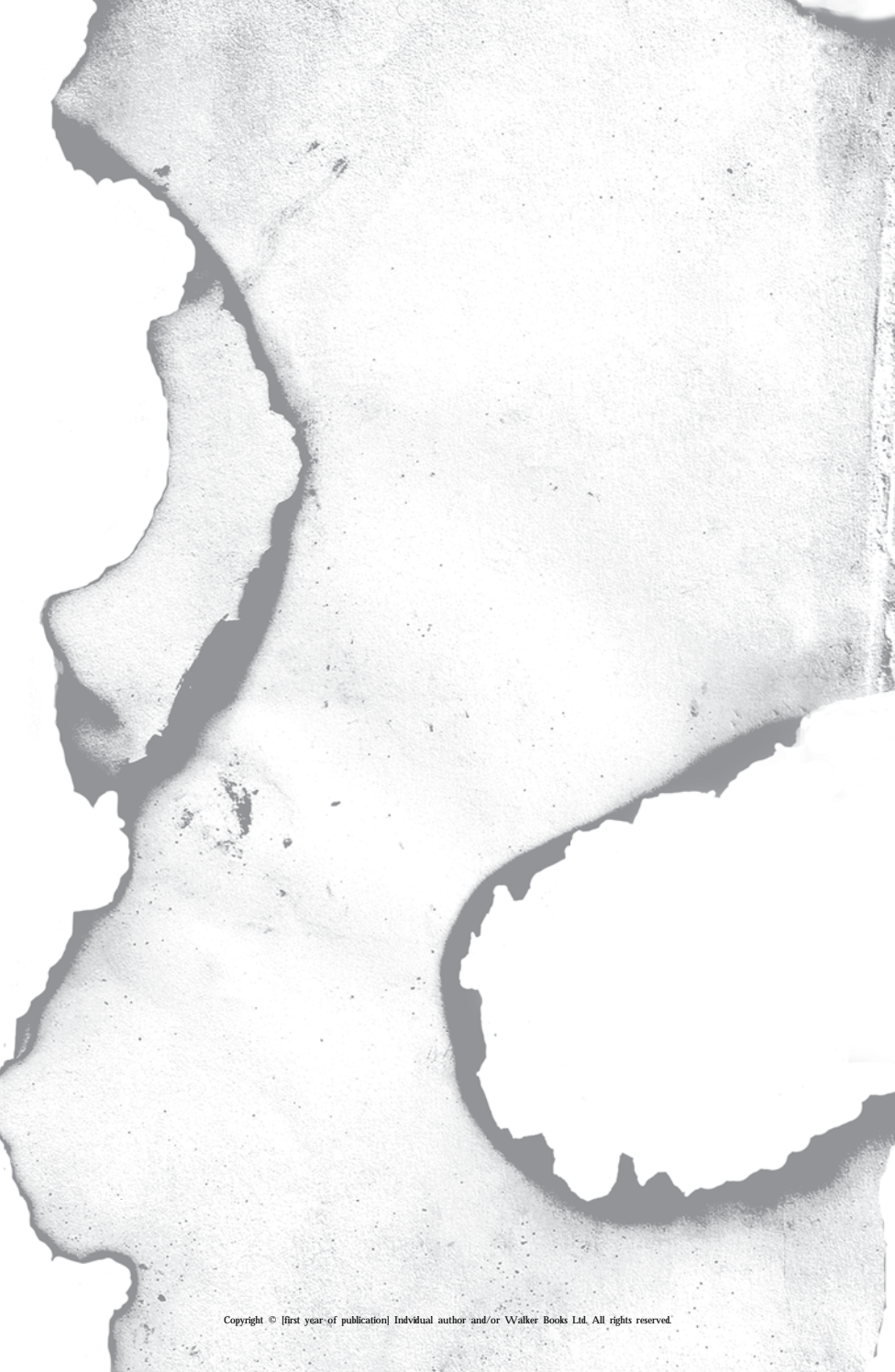
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-4063-4732-6

www.walker.co.uk

To Mam, I love you

To Dad, I miss you



1. Nan Burns the House Down

We were watching telly the night Nan burnt the house down. It was March 1974, and I was fifteen years of age. I thought I lost everything in that fire, but what did I know about loss? Nothing, that's what. I would learn soon enough.

I think the fire changed us – me and Dom. Though I didn't feel much different at first, I think something inside of us opened up, or woke up. I think, all at once, we began to understand how easily things are broken and taken and lost. It was like walking through a door: on one side was the warm, cosy sitting room of our childhood; on the other, a burnt-out shell of ash and char.

I think that's how the goblin-boy was able to see us. Though he'd been there for every summer of our childhood – mine and Dom's – we'd only been stupid boys until then. Stupid, happy, ignorant boys. And what in hell would he have had in common with two stupid boys? But after the fire we were different. We were maybe a little bit like him. And so he saw us, at last, and he thought he'd found a home.



The night of the fire, Ma had brought chips home and we were eating them from the bags, our feet on the coffee table, our eyes glued to the TV. Looking back, it's weird to remember that we were watching *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Looking back, it seems prophetic – but at the time I just remember hating it. It didn't feel like a proper war movie at all. It was all about the Germans for one thing. Sure, they were the bad guys! Who wants to watch a war movie about the bad guys? And they weren't even acting like bad guys. They just acted like normal lads – though it had to be said they were a bloody dismal bunch. That was another thing I hated. Who needs a dismal war movie? Where were the heroics? Where was the excitement? What was it with all the mud and confusion? I flicked a glance at Dom who was lying on the floor sucking the vinegar out of the bottom of his chip bag. He was frowning uncertainly at the screen.

“Are they Nazis?” he said.

“No,” said Dad. “They're just lads.”

Dom turned to look at him. “But they're Germans!”

Dad went to say something but just then Nan came in from the kitchen, and he went quiet. I think he was hoping she'd just sit down and fall back asleep, but she didn't. She stood at the back of the sofa instead, staring at the TV and fluttering her hands, kind of horrified. “Oh no!” she said. “No, no! That's not nice! All that mud! Oh, bless him. *Bless* him! That's not *nice*!”

Ma sighed and stood up and went around to her. Nan blinked, startled, as Ma took her by the elbow.

“It’s all right, Cheryl love,” said Ma. “It’s only a film.”

Dad reached behind him and touched Nan’s hand. “Tell you what, Mam,” he said quietly, “why don’t you come sit in your chair and have a nice cuppa?”

I looked away, because Nan’s confusion made me angry.

I think she must have shuffled from one foot to the other for a moment; I could hear her muttering and sighing. But then that ad came on the telly – the one for Old Spice with the waves in it – and the music made her happy again, like it always did. Next I knew, she was sitting in her chair, smiling and taking a cup of tea from Dad. We all kind of relaxed a bit.

The film started again and Dad sighed. I don’t think he was enjoying that movie any more than I was. The next ads came on. Nan murmured in her sleep, “Oh, love, were you here all this time?”

Dad leapt up, rubbing his hands together. “Right! Pee then tea.”

He kissed Ma on the way out the door and she called after him to bring in the Jaffa Cakes.

We didn’t notice him backing into the room until he’d got to the end of the sofa and grabbed Ma’s shoulder. She swatted him in annoyance, thinking he was messing. Then she saw his face, and her expression went all flat and ready for anything.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

“Get Mam out into the front garden, Olive. Just take her out as calm as you can. Don’t come back in. I’m going upstairs for Dee.”

They looked at each other and my ma's eyes got enormous. "Dave," she whispered, "is that smoke?"

Dom leapt up from where he was lying. He had been drawing his comic book and was still clutching a purple marker. There were purple smudges all over his fingers, and his face was covered in purple fingerprints where he'd had his chin resting in his hand. I began to stand up. Our front room never seemed so small as when the three Finnerty men all stood up together.

I wanted to ask, *What's wrong?* As usual, Dom did it for me.

"Dad?" he said. "Is something...?"

"Listen!" said Dad. "Just *listen*. Dom, help take Nan outside. Keep her calm and act like nothing's wrong." He turned to me. "Pat, I'm going upstairs. Once everyone's outside, don't let them come back in this house. Do you hear me? I don't care *what* happens."

I nodded.

Dad went into the hall, glanced towards the kitchen, and motioned us to the front door.

Ma was waking Nan, a slow process at the best of times. "Come on, Cheryl love. Get up, me old darlin'. Up you get now."

"Where we goin'?" asked Nan, her quavery old voice fuddled with more than just sleep. "Are we late for Mass?"

"A little bit, darlin'. We need to hurry. Ups-a-daisy now. Up we go."

Ma knew. I could tell by the way she herded Nan past

Dad and didn't look back down the hall. Dom ran ahead. He already had the hall door open and was standing in the porch, his hand on the porch-door latch when Dad roared, "STOP!"

We all froze. Dad held his hand out, as if to keep us all from moving. He wasn't a broad man, but he seem to fill the entire hall right then, a living barrier between us and whatever lay hidden in the kitchen. "Dom," he said, "don't open that door yet! It's very important. Let everyone into the porch *first*. *Then* shut the hall door behind you, and *then* open the porch door. Have you got that?"

Dom nodded, his brown eyes huge. Ma hustled Nan in beside him and they all stood crammed together in the porch, staring back at Dad. Nan began querulously looking for her handbag, and Ma hung onto her without speaking, her eyes glued to Dad as if afraid he'd disappear. I could smell the smoke now. I could actually hear the flames. Somewhere behind my dad, something huge was on fire. Dad pinned me down with same look he'd just given Dom, and it hit me how serious this all was.

Our house was on fire. It was on *fire*.

"Patrick," said Dad, "shut that porch door after everyone's outside. *It's very important*. I'm going upstairs for your sister and I don't give a shite what happens when I'm up there, you are *not* to let your ma or Dom or your nan back into this house. Do you understand?"

My eyes slid past him, and I nearly fell over with shock at the sight of the kitchen door. The cheap wood was glowing, its paint all bubbled up and hissing. Black fingers of smoke

were twisting through the gaps of the doorjamb, reaching for the ceiling and spreading up the walls. I opened my mouth to yell, but before I could make a sound Dad had shoved me into the overcrowded porch and slammed the hall door in my face. I was left staring at my own reflection in the glass.

Nan was demanding to be released from this telephone box, and Ma yelled at Dom to open the porch door. He did and they all tumbled out into the coal-fire smell of the suburban night, leaving a cold space whistling at my back. I stayed where I was while Ma ran screaming four doors up to the Reid's, who had the only telephone on the road. Dom was left to corral Nan, who was trying to wander down the street to catch a bus to Galway.

I could see Dad through the rippled orange glass of the hall-door panels, lashing it up the stairs to Dee's room. I stared through the glass, willing him to come back down the stairs, Dee in his arms. I could still see that kitchen door as if it were right there in front of me. The brief glance I'd had of it had been enough to lodge every detail in my mind.

I heard Dad come barrelling down the stairs, saw his wobbly shape through the orange glass and recognized the pink bundle in his arms as my sister. As he was hitting the hall carpet, I realized I hadn't done my job. The porch door was still gaping open, and the old man was reaching for the doorhandle.

Dad. No.

My heart stuttered in my chest. I opened my mouth to warn him and lifted my hand to close the door. All late.

Too late. But Jesus, Dad paused, his hand on the latch, his head bowed against the glass as if listening to the outside air. I heard him, muffled: “Pat?”

The world slammed back full-colour and me standing there with my mouth open. “Hang on, Dad! Hang on.” I slammed the porch door shut with a force that would have earned me a clatter at any other time, and my dad almost instantly banged open the hall door. His face was pulled down in a frightened mask, the skin under his eyes stretched thin and whiter than milk. The hall behind him was perfectly normal, apart from the huge black ball of smoke that filled the far end of it. It had rolled up the walls and was spread in a rippling fan across the ceiling, and through the smoke, an eye, an evil eye, pulsed hot and red at the entrance to our kitchen. Flames were shimmering across the surface of the door, a simmering wash of heat.

At the threshold of the porch, my dad turned and looked back. Outlined against the flames and smoke, he was like some medieval hero – like something bigger than just my dad. For a moment he glared at the fire: man to dragon, mortal to elemental. Then he slammed the hall door, pushed out of the porch and shoved me ahead of him into the night.

Ma raced screaming out of the dark and grabbed Dad and Dee in a death-grip. Dee woke up and started bawling, and Ma took her in her arms, gabbling about fire brigades and phone calls while Dad pushed all of us out onto the path. Mr and Mrs Reid and their gang of girls came crowding down the road from their house, goggle-eyed and excited,

as if expecting to see all of us standing in flames in the front garden. They stopped in a confused little huddle at the gate and we all stood staring at the house.

“Looks OK, Dave.” Mr Reid sounded defensive, probably beginning to suspect some kind of joke.

“Jaysus, it’s bleedin’ freezin’.” That was Naomi Reid’s harsh nasal whine.

“Shurrup, Naomi, right?” Maureen’s equally grating reply.

“*You* shurrup.”

“No, *you*.”

“Both of youse shurrup.” Sharon, skinniest and scariest of them all.

The Reid girls in all their ladylike glory.

Dom was herding Nan back up the road, and I was just beginning to think we’d all imagined it when the glass in our front door suddenly got a whole lot brighter.

“Jesus,” said Dad.

The sitting room, where we’d only just been eating chips and watching telly, was hidden behind heavy curtains. For a moment we could see no difference there. But gradually a steady, cheerful glow began to suffuse the window, as though a great big fire was burning in a great big hearth. There was no such thing as a great big hearth in these houses, no sir, just crappy, asthma-inducing central heating. I watched the jolly, orange warmth seep through the thick material of the curtains, and I imagined the dragon in there, lapping at our furniture with its seething tongue.

A thread of illumination ran along the hem of the curtain.

At first it was just a thin, creeping embroidery of gold – and then whoosh, a window of naked flame. Just like that. One minute an innocent curtain, the next a roiling, smoke-laden landscape of fire filling the window of our front room.

The upstairs windows began to light up. First Dee's room. Then ours.

Ours.

I imagined Dom's desk. His drawings curling up and blackening – page after page of his comic books, his hard-won paintbrushes, his pencils. I imagined my notebooks, my copybooks full of short stories, my novel. All those handwritten pages being eaten one at a time, crisping, blackening, curling away from each other, the words scorching and rising up in soot, never to be read again.

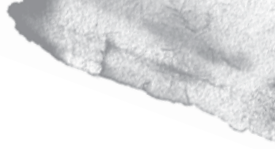
We were losing it all.

My eyes were burning, but I couldn't blink. Looking up at our window, I could see the corner of our bunk bed. As I watched, the top mattress – Dom's mattress – began to smoke, and the wall behind it lit up in dancing light. I saw our Horslips poster, its edges starting to smoulder. Then suddenly it ignited, drifting up in great curls of flame. It floated away from the wall, dissolving into orange butterflies and black feathers.

"Jesus," said Dad again.

We could hear it now – the dragon – roaring its way through the house, eating, eating its way through our house, and leaving us nothing.

I looked over at Dom, my mirror, my reflection, my



identical twin. He had sat Nan down on the garden wall and was standing behind her, his hands on her shoulders. His eyes were fixed on our bedroom window, his face a blank slate of shock.

“Dom,” I said.

He looked over to me at once. I wanted to say, *Our stuff, Dom. All our stuff.* But, as usual, I couldn’t find the words. I remember his big eyes glittering then, and the beginning of realization creeping into his expression. He looked down at his hand and took something out of his pocket. It was his purple marker. He held it up to me, a rueful expression on his face, and shrugged as if to say, *Oh, well. We’ve got this.*

A fucking purple marker.

“I’ll have butter, but no jam,” murmured Nan, complacently settling herself down to watch the show. Ma sat down beside her, Dee already asleep again in her arms.

Something huge burst inside the house with a cartoon-like POP.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” said Dad. He backed up to sit beside Ma, and took her hand.

Mr and Mrs Reid and the girls were a row of gaping mouths and shining eyes behind them. Dom swung his legs over the wall and I went over and sat by his side. Far away, the first wails of the fire engines could be heard threading their way towards us. And as we waited, we watched, our faces all lit up with fire, as the dragon finished its complete and terminal consumption of our home.